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### Deposited in DRO:

13 May 2014

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Sunderland, Luke (2012) 'Chanson de geste.', in The Princeton encyclopedia of poetry and poetics. 4th ed. , pp. 220-222.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://press.princeton.edu/titles/9677.html>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

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# CHANSONS DE GESTE

are epic poems recounting the feats of Charlemagne, or other kings of the Carolingian era, and their barons. The term *geste* originally meant “heroic deeds” but came also to signify the “historical record” provided by the texts relating them and, by extension, the “family” or “lineage” responsible for them. Around 120 poems survive. Early criticism focused on the question of the origins of the corpus: the “traditionalists” argued from the presence of elements of historical fact in the songs that they were the textual remnants of a collective oral tradition going back to the era of the events told (this view was revived in the 1950s by J. Rychner). But the extant versions, found in some 300 manuscripts, date mainly from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and their preoccupations are arguably those of this period: hence the opposing, “individualist” view (pioneered by J. Bédier) that they are authorial creations with little regard for “tradition.” The *chansons de geste* show evidence of interaction with other 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century literary genres, principally romance (\*medieval romance), but also chronicles, lyric and hagiography. Some *chansons* have come down to us in a series of different redactions: for example *La Chanson de Roland*, whose Anglo-Norman version is one of the earliest and undoubtedly the best-known of all *chansons de geste*, also survives in three Old French and three Franco-Italian versions. Carolingian epics were widely diffused: most codices are in Old French, but there is an important set of *chansons de geste* in Anglo-Norman (including *Gormont et Isembard* and *La Chanson de Guillaume*, two of the earliest surviving texts), a small group of Occitan epics (*Girart de Roussillon*, *Daurel et Beton*), and a large corpus of poems in the hybrid literary language of Franco-Italian, mainly locatable to the Veneto (*La Geste Francor*, *L'Entrée d'Espagne*). Independent Italian reworkings of the material grew

out of the latter corpus, and *chansons de geste* were elsewhere translated into Middle High German, Middle Dutch, Old Norse and Icelandic, as well as influencing the Castilian epic. The genre was well-known and highly popular, and continued to be rewritten, compiled and revived – particularly in prose recastings – into the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***Gestes, Continuations, Cycles***

Modern criticism has tended to follow the classification given by the medieval author Bertrand de Bar-sur-Aube in the epic *Girart de Vienne*, which divides the *chansons* into three *gestes*: *la geste du roi* (narrating the deeds of Charlemagne and his barons, including Roland), *la geste de Garin de Monglane* (concerning the lineage of Garin, ancestor of the great Guillaume d'Orange) and *la geste de Doon de Mayence* (a group of rebel barons and traitors). However, only one of these groupings – *la geste de Garin de Monglane* – appears in manuscripts as a \*cycle. The largest cyclical Garin codex unites 18 poems about Guillaume, his ancestors, and his kinsmen the Narbonnais (the Narbonnais poems are also found as a cycle in their own right). Although one codex gathers together a selection of texts concerning rebel barons (including *Doon de Mayence*, *La Chevalerie d'Ogier* and *Renaut de Montauban*), it is perhaps preferable not to give too much priority to Bertrand's categorization, and rather to speak of a general tendency of epics to collect themselves into sequences and to recruit additional songs as prequels (such as *Enfances* texts narrating the youthful exploits of well-known heroes) and sequels (including *Mort* and *Moniage* texts, telling of a hero's final days). The *Chanson de Roland* inspired a number of continuations and prologues such as *Anseïs de Carthage*, *Aspremont*, and *Gaydon*. Other groupings are the vast Crusade Cycle (historical poems about the First and

Third Crusades, with imaginative continuations); the Franco-Italian *Geste Francor* (featuring texts about Pepin and the young Charlemagne and Roland), and sets of poems associated with the heroes Huon de Bordeaux, Jourdain de Blaye, and Renaut de Montauban, and the Loheren, Nanteuil, and Saint-Gille lineages.

### Form and Style

Most *chansons de geste* are in \*decasyllables, although some are in \*octosyllables or dodecasyllables (also known as \*alexandrines). Lines are grouped into strophes called \**laisses*, which are united by \*assonance in most poems. Rhyme began to feature from the late 12th century, and the use of assonance after this point may be a deliberate archaism signaling the age and tradition of the material. The decasyllabic line normally features a \*caesura after four syllables, with the first part of the line often filled by repeated formulae. This can be viewed as evidence of the poems' oral composition (see Rychner), but many repetitive, apparently "oral," elements are in fact part of the epics' functioning as written texts. Not only phrases, but also actions are repeated, such as when a series of *laisses* retell the same event from different perspectives (*laisses similaires*) or when separate events are made analogous by being described in broadly the same terms (*laisses parallèles*). More broadly, similar characters and plot-lines recur. The overall tendency to repetition inspired and facilitated continuations, many of which feature new generations of warriors who avenge their kinsmen or pursue the grievances of their forefathers. The formulae used to describe characters make them fixed types who act out timeless conflicts: valiant heroes versus their evil opponents, either "Saracens" (a catch-all term used interchangeably with the term "pagan" to describe the religious enemies of Christians) or cowardly, underhand traitors. The entire genre suggests that the past is never

dead and buried; the epics are set in a Carolingian past that is always also present, portrayed as having structural similarities with the periods in which the poems were written, reworked and compiled.

### **Ethics and Politics**

The dramatic tension animating the *chansons de geste* comes partly from a clash between a warrior ethos advocating uncompromising, to-the-death violence as the solution to all problems and another ethos that sees violence itself as the problem and seeks to restrain bloodthirsty tendencies. The hero is the privileged site of controversies: he inspires and unifies as the incarnation of the hopes and dreams of a particular community, for victory (e.g. Roland) or for peace and stability (e.g. Guillaume in *Le Couronnement de Louis*), but he also pursues singularity, desiring to stand alone, independent of the rest of humanity (the extreme case is *Raoul de Cambrai*, which describes the unfettered destruction stemming from Raoul's complete alienation from all social structures). There are a number of communal groupings in the epics: families and lineages; crusade identities gathering diverse Western Christian soldiers under the banner of "Franks"; alliances with the emperor or king; and cohesion "between men" on the battlefield, where fellow combatants are frequently mirror-images of each other (a logic carried to its culmination in *Ami et Amile*, whose two heroes are practically indistinguishable). Each of these structures creates solidarity but also produces and excludes an opposite: family loyalty leads to vengeful and never-ending feuds against other families; Crusade ideology demonizes the Saracen enemy; rebellions ensue when the sovereign favors one party; and restrictive gender politics bring violence against women or their marginalization. Though attempts have been made to incorporate the *chansons de geste* into a national

French literary canon, they generally represent the interests of one narrow social group: powerful regional barons. The “rebel baron” epics argue for the barons’ right to attack the king to seek redress for injustice (*Gaydon*, *Renaut de Montauban*); other poems feature a baron resisting the king in an attempt to preserve the independence of a region not considered to be part of “France,” such as Burgundy (*Aspremont*) and Occitania (*Girart de Roussillon*). The baronial perspective explains the tyrannical qualities of the king in many texts, where he is intransigent, omnipotent and unreasonable. The corpus as a whole is engaged with contemporary politics: the narratives are reflections on concepts such as sovereignty, fealty and lordship, and they feature ethical debates on the rights and wrongs of war. But such discussions are repeatedly overridden by the prevailing drive to violence, and the society portrayed is subject to self-destructive impulses.

### **Aesthetics**

The *chansons de geste* are thrilling, action-packed texts, whose most striking aesthetic feature is the vivid and gory presentation of violence. The sights and sounds of battle are described in horrifying detail: men and horses are chopped in two, limbs are lost, bowels and brains spill out, and blood pours onto grass, producing a contrast of colors that is often remarked upon. The recurring phrase “or veïssiez” (“now you would have seen”) invites readers and listeners to imagine themselves at the scene. There is a repeated movement from an aesthetic of order and beauty (as warriors line up and armor glistens) to one of chaos and destruction. In the thick of battle, critical reflection on the consequences of violence is suspended, and we are encouraged to become emotionally involved in the action. Enemies are often monstrous or devious,

whereas heroes are proud, honorable, and muscular. Violence is thereby justified as part of a transcendent struggle between the forces of good and evil.

### **The Religious, the Exotic and the Fantastic**

The *chansons de geste* are ostensibly religious texts: their heroes are the soldiers of God, who pray frequently, devote themselves to war against confessional enemies, and are always ready to sacrifice their lives (martyrs include Vivien in *Aliscans* and Roland). But beneath this lie more earthly considerations: crusade is inspired by the desire for land and power (as witness *Le Charroi de Nîmes*); the East is a place of exotic treasure (*Le Pèlerinage de Charlemagne*), of magic and the fantastic (*Huon de Bordeaux*), or of multilingual diversity (*L'Entrée d'Espagne*), and the Saracen is as much an object of fascination as a religious other. In some texts, an alluring Saracen princess helps the Christian hero conquer territory before converting to Christianity and marrying him (*La Prise d'Orange*). Other Saracens are integrated into Christian society because of their usefulness as warriors and allies, such as the giant Rainouart in *Aliscans*. Elsewhere, the religious aspect of the texts is merely an exit from otherwise intractable narrative problems, or a way to transcend violence. In *Girart de Vienne*, God stops a combat between Roland and his future companion Oliver, and *La Chanson de Roland* ends with God's miracle ensuring justice is done. Some texts have saintly endings where the hero becomes a monk or hermit to atone for a life of violent sin (*Girart de Roussillon*, *Le Moniage Guillaume*).

(1,712 words)

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See also EPIC; FRANCE, POETRY OF; HEROIC POETRY; NARRATIVE  
POETRY